



Jim Klobuchar

It's tobacco cash vs. public health

The overseers of the Metrodome will decide Wednesday whether money from the tobacco industry counts more than the public's health.

The executive director of the Metrodome commission, Bill Lester, puts on a face of resignation when the issue is debated this way.

But you can't spell it any other way.

Lester deals with cost effectiveness and bottom-line economics. He and some people on the commission feel rejected and annoyed by a rising public demand to end cigarette advertising in the Metrodome. Those demands are being made because cigarettes are lethal. They are made because the sublimic environment in which cigarettes are showcased is another personalized pressure for kids to smoke. They are made because Minnesota stands with the nation's leaders in recognizing the hazard and — through its hospitals — in witnessing the wreckage.

Those demands are bothersome to part of the commission and their supporters because they have mandated up negotiations with potential advertisers on the new scoreboard. As a result, the scheduled April arrival of the slick new electronic wonder is threatened.

Step back and tap your breast, folks. You're looking up progress.

The commissioners have a problem. They want to finance the \$5 billion scoreboard so that it will do more than sport out roller replays and general pizzazz to the Metrodome customers. The advertising money also would spare the commission the political discomfort of levying a liquor and motel tax.

The R.J. Reynolds company, whose Winston cigarettes are advertised in the Metrodome, has four years left on its contract. At issue is the eighth year period after the initial four years. If you leave the issue to the accountants, Reynolds is a perfect corporate angel to guarantee both the scoreboard and the receipts for the commission. Its cigarettes, however, were not made in heaven. They and others contribute directly to the deaths of thousands of people in America yearly, more than 4,000 of them in Minnesota. The campaign will roll back the destructive, he calms the medical community and millions of older citizens who can't be accused of mounting unrealistic problems. They want to keep those cigarettes from their lips.

Smoking is a choice. If you smoke, it doesn't make you less body or worthy. The question on the Metrodome is not whether smoking is right. It is whether a highly visible public agency in Minnesota will put dollars ahead of lives.

The argument you hear from some on the commission, "We may not be able to make it without cigarette advertising," is an evasion.

Make what? Make the scoreboard by April? The Twins might want it by April, but they're not going to move the franchise to Tibet because the stadium isn't ready by April. The Twins don't want the scoreboard at all if it includes cigarette advertising.

Lester and his friends on the commission are decent people responding to a budget speech by talking about bottom lines. Like a lot of decent people who get into that pitch. But the Metrodome is not their preserve. What happens tomorrow is a mirror. Are we willing to turn down an immediate big buck to act on something more important? Lester says the commission's responsibility is to act in a

"financially prudent manner." You have heard language like that before to excuse a public agency from leading instead of being a broker. If the commission's only responsibility were to make ends meet, it might as well solicit the Mall.

The tobacco industry is making streams like the Metrodome a battleground. You hear threats from some commission voices that "no outstanding corporate citizen in Minnesota has come forward to replace Reynolds. It comes down to how you address these corporate citizens, and when. And not bearing from them at all is no excuse to seal out human health for peddlers' bottom lines."

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